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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001884

SIPDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y - PARA MARKINGS CORRECTED

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/ELA; NSC FOR  
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SUBJECT: LEBANON: EVALUATING MICHEL SLEIMAN

REF: BEIRUT 1877

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) Reftel notes the reasons why March 14 leaders, after having courageously stood up against compromise with Hizballah and Syria for more than a year and despite three assassinations, are now moving forward with a plan to elect Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Michel Sleiman as Lebanon's next president. With Sleiman long presumed by many to be Syria's top choice for Baabda Palace, this is a dismaying development: in no way can a Sleiman victory be described as a March 14 victory. While March 14 leaders will surely seek (and we will back) certain compensatory assurances from Sleiman in return for their parliamentary votes, the LAF commander -- while an improvement over Emile Lahoud -- is not a March 14 candidate. (Perversely, that is exactly why France, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, advocates of a consensus president, seem to have lined up behind him.)

¶2. (S) But, while it's clear that Sleiman is not March 14, it is less obvious how beholden to Syria and Hizballah he is. As we review all the information available to us and replay the experience of the period since Emile Lahoud's presidential mandate was extended in September 2004, we see a very mixed picture. Sleiman, whom PM Siniora describes as an "ordinary man" (meaning less devious than most Lebanese politicians) comes across as someone -- not brilliant, not impressive, not wealthy or from a powerful family, not particularly well-connected -- who tried to hedge his bets as the rules under which he had long benefited suddenly changed dramatically in the aftermath of Rafiq Hariri's February 2005 assassination. Not certain what the future would hold, he seems to have done as well as anyone in keeping contacts with all sides.

¶3. (S) Certainly, Sleiman's public comments until very recently have been abysmal, pro-Hizballah in nature with little attempt to be neutral. While wincing at Sleiman's "farewell speech" to Syrian troops in April 2005, we remember two occasions in particular, one year apart -- Army Day on August 2005 (when March 14 was at its peak of popularity and support) and the deployment of the LAF to south Lebanon in August 2006 (in the aftermath of UNSCR 1701's adoption) -- where Sleiman's exaggerated public vows to "protect the

Resistance" provoked us to go see Sleiman to complain. In our view, Sleiman's praise of Hizballah went far beyond what was considered de rigeur by local politics and circumstances.

Recently, such as in his remarks for a Nahr al-Barid memorial service, Sleiman has moderated his tone significantly. But any good journalist will easily find damning words from Sleiman to reinforce the impression that a Sleiman presidential victory is a Syrian-Hizballah victory.

14. (S) Sleiman's actions have been more nuanced. We expect, in fact, that, were we to probe, he would argue that his "March 8-sounding" words were in part intended to compensate for LAF deployments that served March 14 interests. In particular, we note the following key events:

-- February 28, 2005: The first mass demonstration after Hariri's assassination was one (not the only) factor that contributed to the resignation of the "made-in-Syria" Karami cabinet later that day. With Syrian troops and intelligence operatives still deployed throughout Lebanon, Sleiman was surely under intense pressure to block the demonstrators from reaching central Beirut. He did not: instead, the LAF facilitated security and circulation. Many pro-Syrians have still not forgiven Sleiman for the collapse of the Karami cabinet.

-- March 14, 2005: The LAF, again, facilitated security and circulation in the largest demonstration Lebanon has ever witnessed. While the LAF had also provided security for the somewhat smaller Hizballah-dominated March 8 demonstration earlier, no one knew until the last minute whether the LAF would permit the pro-independence rally to occur. We remember seeing Sleiman repeatedly and passing messages to him indirectly as well in the lead-up to the demonstration.

-- August 2006 deployment of the LAF to south Lebanon: Sleiman, despite inadequate logistics structure, deployed 8,000 troops south of the Litani, in accord with UNSCR 1701,

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in a matter of days and over the complaints of local leaders who said that, between the LAF and incoming UNIFIL troops, the military presence in south Lebanon was too heavy for the local population to bear.

-- January 25, 2007 riot control: After failing to keep the streets quiet during the Hizballah-Aoun demonstrations two days earlier, the LAF intervened forcibly to separate Sunni and Shia fighters during a dispute that started out as a university rumble but threatened to lead to widespread Sunni-Shia clashes. By all accounts, the LAF acted non-politically and in the interest of stability and security.

-- May-September 2007 Nahr al-Barid fight: While initially reluctant, Sleiman, pressured from above and below, did pursue the Nahr al-Barid fight to the end, despite heavy losses and despite Hizballah Secretary General Nasrallah's "red line" against entering the camp. During the fight, Sleiman also made comments dismissing the theory that Fatah al-Islam was a product of the Hariris. While this may have been a legally inappropriate judgment for a commander to make, it was politically a courageous thing to do, when all of the pro-Syrians were lining up behind the theory that the Hariris and their Saudi backers had created Fatah al-Islam in their drive to "Islamise" Lebanon.

-- November 22, 2007 orders regarding security: In the lead-up to the presidential vacuum, Sleiman issued statements and ordered deployments that were seen as a deterrent steps to any March 8-Aoun street action designed to takeover GOL institutions. Sleiman ignored Emile Lahoud's last-minute letter to him, effectively rendering the letter irrelevant in the eyes of the public.

15. (S) On the other side of the ledger, we find actions (or

inaction) that benefit Hizballah and its allies. Most egregiously, Hizballah has, by most accounts, rebuilt its arsenal after last summer's war, right under the nose of the LAF. While the LAF has seized a few trucks of weapons and uncovered a few weapons depots in the south, the LAF seems to have mostly looked the other way as weapons were transported around the country. Sleiman would, we predict, argue that the LAF does not have the authority to check trucks at the legal crossing points (controlled by a combination of Surete General, customs, and the ISF), but the LAF has not tried in any sustained way to prevent smuggling at illegal crossing points. Again, Sleiman would probably have a ready-made answer: the 2005 cabinet statement approved by parliament has "protection of the Resistance" as one of the GOL's goals. Therefore, he would argue, it is not illegal to transport rockets around the country.

16. (S) We find two major events in the last year to be of ambiguous significance: we are not sure what lessons to draw. On December 1, 2006, Hizballah-Aounist mobs seemed on the verge of overrunning the Grand Serail. All access to and from the Serail was cut off, as the understaffed LAF units were engulfed by protesters. Those in the Serail started to panic. Eventually, the LAF succeeded -- after much pressure, including visits by us to Sleiman -- in opening up all roads except one (still closed today) leading to the Grand Serail. Did the LAF do the right thing in opening roads, or was the fact that the roads were allowed to be closed off in the first place damning evidence of LAF complicity in the siege? We also believe that diplomacy more than LAF action is what was key to lifting the siege on the Serail; had Hizballah not started to pull back its supporters, we doubt the LAF would have taken action to relieve the Serail. If forced to make a judgment, we would hold this incident as a black mark against Sleiman.

17. (S) The second incident with an ambiguous lesson is the experience of January 23, 2007, when Hizballah, Amal, and Aoun forces blocked key intersections in a demonstration that quickly turned violent. The LAF was initially passive. When units did start to react, they reacted not against those closing the roads but against the Jumblatt and Geagea forces who were en route to try to open roads the army had declined to secure. Eventually, Sleiman solicited and secured political backing for a curfew and got the LAF to enforce it. Facing criticism from all sides, Sleiman, in the middle of the day, tendered his resignation to Defense Minister Murr.

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One can argue that this was a sinister attempt to divide the army (as the Christians and Shia would have been unwilling to report to the Acting Commander, a Druse allied with Jumblatt), but we wonder if Sleiman was simply overwhelmed with a chaotic situation on the ground with no easy answer.

18. (S) In summary, when we look at Sleiman, we do not see an inherently evil, Syrian stooge in the model of Emile Lahoud. Nor do we see a clever fox similar to Nabih Berri. We see someone who, at a personal level, is as decent and honest as anyone in the sordid world of Lebanese politics. But he has risen to his current position by playing it safe and posing no threat to the Syrian-imposed system that in turn rewarded and promoted him. He is similar, we believe, to some of the old, gray East European apparatchiks who were never "true believers," who wouldn't impress anyone, but who had sufficient ambitions to want to be on the winning side. Like the East Europeans who blinked bewilderingly in the new post-1989 sunshine, Sleiman is trying to make his way in profoundly changed circumstances.

19. (S) The trouble is that, unlike in the case of Eastern Europe, the old ways here are not yet banished, meaning Sleiman is likely to remain an enigmatic cipher hoping to cultivate ties with both sides of Lebanon's political divide. If he is president -- a prospect that does not fill us with enthusiasm, but appears to be increasingly inevitable -- the

challenge will be ensuring that he does not become a tool by which Syria's influence becomes pervasive again. In his conviction that he has outsmarted the Syrians by adopting one of their tools for himself, Saad Hariri, whom we see later today, should not be naive in believing that this will be an easy task.

FELTMAN